

YETI: MAN OR BEAST?

The Yeti - a mysterious creature that walks on two legs - has been part of Tibetan folklore for thousands of years.

Long intrigued by the legend, scientist Mark Evans has assembled a team of leading international geneticists who will use cutting-edge DNA analysis to help him find out, once and for all, if there is a rational explanation for the 'Abominable Snowman'.

Traveling half way round the world, his mission is to explore two competing theories for the Yeti. Could it be a different species of human that was pushed to the margins by Homo sapiens and clung on in the high Himalaya until more recently than anyone thought possible? Or is the Yeti some kind of unknown bear?

In Italy, Mark meets renowned mountaineer Reinhold Messner – the first person to climb Mount Everest without carrying oxygen. He claims to have encountered a 'Chemo' (a local name for a Yeti) in the eastern part of Tibet, and is convinced that the beast is some kind of special bear. "The Yeti is based on a huge bear living in the Himalaya," says Messner.

Mark heads to Nepal's wild Tibetan frontier in search of Yeti remains that have never been scientifically tested. He collects ancient flesh from what is claimed to be a Yeti hand in a crumbling palace, a shaving of alleged 'Yeti' leg bone kept by a herbal healer, and a clump of fur that a yak herder believes could also be from a Yeti.

British mountaineer Steve Berry shows Mark intriguing photos he took last year, of a set of footprints on an unexplored Himalayan mountain in Bhutan. Days from the nearest human habitation, he claims they could only have been made by a biped, such as a Yeti.

Other 'Yeti' samples include forty-year-old remains from a monastery in India, and fur from a strange-looking bear shot by a Nazi SS expedition hoping to find evidence of a superhuman species related to Aryans. Like Messner, expedition leader Ernst Schafer was convinced that Yetis were, in fact, bears.

Mark takes all his samples to Dr Charlotte Lindqvist, the world's leading expert in bear genetics and evolution, for analysis. She will be able to tell him if the remains come from bears and, if so, which species.

Meanwhile, Mark also explores the theory that Yetis could be a long-lost species of human, known as Denisovans, whose remains were found in a Siberian cave in 2010. Denisovan DNA contains a unique gene mutation - EPAS 1 - that's crucial for life at high altitude, and which is found today only in people of Tibetan ancestry.

In California, Mark meets the man who discovered the Denisovan-Tibetan connection, Professor Rasmus Nielsen. "We know there must have been interbreeding between humans and Denisovans. There is no other way you can explain the extreme similarities between the Tibetan DNA sequence and the DNA sequence you find in the Denisovans."

Adapted to live at altitude, could Denisovans have thrived high on the Tibetan plateau, beyond our reach? Mark has saliva samples from a dozen Tibetan Sherpas for Professor Nielsen to analyse. Will the results prove that the Sherpas' ancestors interbred with Denisovans? And could Denisovans have lived recently enough to have inspired folktales of wild-men, or 'Yetis', that are still told today?

Producer/Director: Steve Gooder

Exec Producers: Harry Marshall, Laura Marshall

Production Company: Icon Films